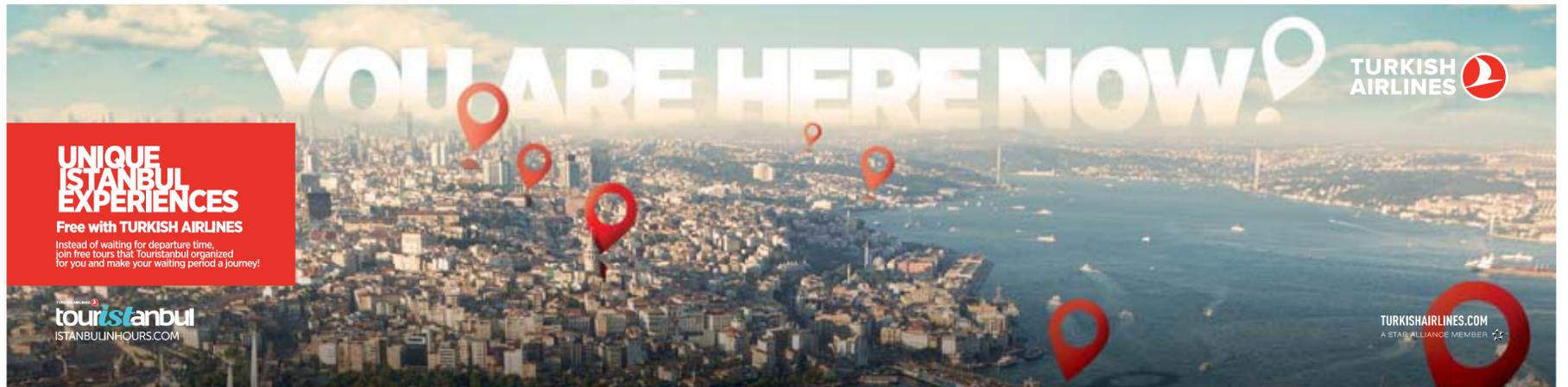


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Reputations burnished, others buffeted at 'best World Cup ever'

This is progress, this is better than the past: Infantino

MOSCOW: A stage for new beginnings, a cementer of fortunes, a last resting place for life-long dreams, the 2018 soccer World Cup was so much more than a month-long festival of goals and glory. "The best World Cup ever," was FIFA President Gianni Infantino's verdict, and there was much evidence to support his view.

Host Russia used the extravaganza to detoxify its global brand and enhance its reputation by breaking down a number of negative stereotypes, and showcasing itself as a nation that can host huge events and welcome tens of thousands of global visitors.

The Russian team, too, came out of the tournament having passed with flying colours. Ranked a lowly 70th in the world at the start and on the back of a nine-month winless run, there were real fears the team could fail to win a match. The Russians need not have worried as Stanislav Cherchesov's men hammered Saudi Arabia 5-0, finished second in their group, beat mighty Spain in a penalty shootout in the last 16, before finally falling to Croatia in the same fashion in the quarters.

Croatia went on to reach their first World Cup final, where they will play France today, in a remarkable achievement for a nation of some four million people. The Croats bettered their previous best of a semi-final spot in 1998 — their first World Cup as an independent nation — with a thrilling extra-time victory over England.

Gareth Southgate's young English side had been seeking to reach the final for the first time since their victory in 1966, but the Croats were too tough, coming back from an early English goal to prevail. They had come from behind in all three knockout games, showing admirable spirit and remarkable fitness.

Regardless of what happens in the remaining two

matches, the reputations of both Croatia and England were greatly enhanced by their runs in the tournament. By no means were all reputations burnished in Russia, however, as some of the biggest names in sport flopped on the biggest stage. Champions Germany suffered their earliest World Cup exit in 80 years when they finished bottom of Group F following defeats by Mexico and South Korea, triggering an inquisition back home. Argentina and Lionel Messi needed a last-gasp goal to scramble through their group, despite a 3-0 loss to Croatia and a 1-1 draw with Iceland, before being beaten by France in the last 16.

Messi was largely invisible throughout. Not so their other talisman, Diego Maradona, whose matchday antics were captured on television. The low point being when the once-great soccer star gave an obscene middle-finger gesture with both hands to fans of Nigeria after a late group-stage winner for Argentina.

"From the hands of God, to the fingers of shame", read one headline in Latin America. The stock of Neymar also took a hit when the Brazilian striker—the world's most expensive footballer—left the tournament after Brazil's quarter-final loss to Belgium with the sound of laughter ringing in his ears.

Even though he undoubtedly came in for some tough tackles, his over-the-top histrionics and gravity-defying spins and rolls along the ground left pundits and commentators half-amused and half-outraged and launched many social media memes. On the whole, though, it has been a clean tournament, with some superb refereeing. Up to and including the semis there had been only four red cards — the lowest since 1978.

The dreaded spectre of VAR proved to be an overblown fear, and instead of breaking up the rhythm of



MOSCOW: File photo shows Croatia fans cheer before the Russia 2018 World Cup semi-final football match between Croatia and England at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow on July 11, 2018. —AFP

the game, it eliminated most cheating, helped referees act on things they had missed and provided elevated levels of drama. "This is progress, this is better than the past," Infantino said. "VAR is not changing football, it is cleaning football, making it more honest and transparent and help-

ing referees to make the right decisions." Honesty and transparency haven't exactly been the buzzwords around football in recent years, so if Infantino has that right, the reputation of the sport itself might be the biggest beneficiary of Russia 2018. — Reuters

Can Croatian mental fortitude defy physiology in final?

By Ricardo Guerra

KUWAIT: When France plays Croatia in the World Cup final today, they will have a significant but often overlooked advantage. Croatia will go into the match against France with 24 hours less time to rest due to the fact that they played their semifinal game one day after the French faced Belgium. The calendar of the World Cup competition gives a major advantage to one of the semi-finalists. An extra 24 hours of rest becomes even more of a factor when you have only three or four days between matches.

The lost day of rest isn't Croatia's only disadvantage: The Croatian players, led by Zlatko Dalic, are also coming into the final having recently played an exhausting semifinal match against England. In that semifinal, they played two halves of extra time. And in the previous game, the Croats played a fatiguing match in the quarterfinals against the Russians. In that game, extra time was followed by the emotional burden of penalty kicks.

It should be noted that the Russian squad in this tournament has been in possession of astounding levels of fitness. Hence, the Croats had to pull everything from deep inside the gas tank. As a result, several Croatian players seemed physically battered after the hard-fought duel.

Making the disparity worse still is the fact that in all their matches, the French have not played a single bout of extra time. Consequently, they have been able to conserve energy and move into the final game with consid-

erable capital. It will clearly be a huge challenge for Croatia to recover in time to play with the energy and vitality necessary to win. They will definitely need the encouragement of the thousands of Croatian fans who have inundated Moscow. France's physiological edge may also confer a psychological advantage in that match. In the backs of their minds, the Croats will know that they may be entering the game with less fuel in the tank, and having those thoughts won't help, especially in a game of this magnitude—one that surely will be the most important in these players' lives.

But we must note that there is a trait of the utmost importance in sports that is often overlooked. Will, or the psychological fortitude of any given team or player, is one of the most difficult and least quantifiable elements in sports. Football experts, pundits and statisticians often consider several elements related to the game, such as individual talent, technique, fitness and tactical prowess, but many observers let will slip by unnoticed, perhaps because this attribute is usually observed only in times of tribulation, defeat or extreme adversity—that is, when a team is losing. Yet the Croats showed plenty of blood, sweat and tears when they faced England. Their mental fortitude was apparent even with a fresher England that had not played an extra set of overtime in their previous match. The main question we have to ask is how they were able to show so much grit against England. In answering that question, we have to go back to history.

It may be worthwhile to note the traumatic recent history of the Croatian people: Their unity may have been forged from the bloody conflict that followed the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Some players in the squad directly faced the brunt of that trauma. Undoubtedly, events such as these can galvanize a group of united men to accomplish extraordinary feats.

If in the final, the Croatian team is able to once again muster this psychological strength to offset the dramatic physiological disadvantage that they face, it would be simply mind boggling. They have already defied the

odds against England. The island should have had a physical advantage, since they had not played overtime just before that encounter.

But the odds against France are of a significantly higher magnitude. It would take a gargantuan effort by the Croats to win the final. France is significantly better than England in all aspects of match play. They are more organized tactically, and in all positions, their players' individual skills exceed those of their English counterparts. Furthermore, they will benefit from the physiological advantage we discussed—an extra day of rest and being spared any extra-time play.

It is evident that both teams have made use of many schemes and of even more complex strategies to shorten their recovery time. However, the success of these strategies depends on how organized, committed and persistent the staff of a team is in mobilizing them.

In fact, even if the Croats use all these strategies, we still cannot be sure they will have adequate time to fully recover, especially given the toll taken by all the other tough matches they have played throughout the tournament. The trauma to physiological systems and subsystems may be too overwhelming for them to come through again.

If Croatia wins, it would defy well-established notions within the field of exercise physiology. Moreover, there is no precedent, at least in World Cup competition, of a team reaching the finals and winning after playing three bouts of overtime in their previous matches. But then again, its one game, and we cannot be sure that the French will show up in full force for the encounter. Let's not forget that they flopped in the final of the Euro against Portugal. And strange things happen in the game of football. Sometimes unknown forces affect the game, and randomness is all around us. Black swan events do happen: Croatia may yet have us all running off to read Nassim Nicholas Taleb. Last but not least, an emotionally resilient mind can accomplish great feats. If the beast mode within the Croatian spirit is let loose once again, France had better watch out.

Cup." Citing an increase in fan ID requests by English fans as the tournament went on, with England reaching the third-place playoff, Sorokin said prejudices about Russia had been broken during the World Cup.

"You see that we did our best to welcome any fans from any country, from any corner of the world," he said. Russia's success on the pitch made the World Cup especially appealing for the host country. Russia qualified automatically for the finals as hosts and entered the tournament as the lowest-ranked team.

But wins against Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the group stage allowed Russia to reach the World Cup knockout stage for the first time in post-Soviet history. Russia went on to eliminate Spain in the round of 16 before losing to finalists Croatia on penalty kicks in the quarter-finals.

"It changed not only the perception of Russia abroad, it changed us," Sorokin said. "We now believe that we can. We can play football well, we can organise events of global importance well." — Reuters

Goals, Neymar and Kalinic: Best and worst of WCup

MOSCOW: Following is a factbox on the best goals, most memorable moments and biggest disappointments of the 2018 World Cup:

No room for Lionel Messi in this list, but Cristiano Ronaldo bags a spot with some individual brilliance that will live long in the memory. Having led Spain twice, but trailing 3-2 in the dying minutes of their opening group game, Portugal won a free kick from 25 yards out.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man ... Ronaldo hitched his shorts up to Y-front proportions and nailed it, smashing and curling the effort past David De Gea to complete his hat-trick.

Perhaps predictably, the world's most expensive footballer, Neymar, would be expected to claim one of the more memorable moments of this World Cup. Maybe not like this, though. While the Brazilian did come in for some tough tackling during the tournament, his over-the-top histrionics, swan-like dives, howls, and gravity-defying spins and rolls along the ground left pundits and commentators chuckling, and launched a thousand social media memes.

There was an element of farce to South Korean Son Heung-min's goal against champions Germany, but the sheer weight of its impact ensures his strike wins a place in this list. The Germans had not been eliminated in the opening round for 80 years, but in the dying seconds of a dramatic night in Kazan, that is precisely what happened.

Germany had pushed everybody, including goalkeeper Manuel Neuer, forward in search of an equaliser allowing Son to sprint onto a long clearance and roll the ball into an empty German net, consigning them to bottom spot in their group.

Adding to the piquancy of the moment, the South Koreans celebrated crazily, in the mistaken belief their victory would see them reach the last 16, when in fact Sweden and Mexico advanced from that group.

Everybody knew that England could not win penalty shootouts at World Cups — they had lost all three previous World Cup deciders (1990, 1998 and 2006) not to mention losing three out of four in European Championships.

So when Colombia equalised in injury time, and the sides were still dead-locked after extra-time, the smart money was on the South Americans to reach the quarter-finals. It had looked like 'same ole, same ole' when Jordan Henderson's spot kick was saved by David Ospina, but Mateus Uribe hit the bar and Jordan Pickford saved from Carlos Bacca, leaving Eric Dier to squeeze the decisive penalty home and send England through.—Reuters

Organisers say World Cup has transformed perception of Russia

MOSCOW: Russia's World Cup organisers said yesterday that the tournament had so far been a success and would help to improve the country's image abroad. With the third-place game and the final remaining, Alexei Sorokin, CEO of the local organising committee, said the country had welcomed more than one million foreign guests during the tournament and that its 12 World Cup stadiums had had a 98-percent occupancy

rate. The month-long tournament, which ends with the final between France and Croatia on Sunday at Moscow's Luzhniki stadium, has so far been without major security incidents. Pre-event fears of racism and hooligan violence have not materialised.

"It changed the perception of Russia abroad," Sorokin told a news conference. "It showed who we are. We showed ourselves as an open, hospitable, welcoming nation." Sorokin said that the fan zones set up in the 11 host cities, including Moscow, St Petersburg and Sochi, had been visited by more than seven million people during the tournament so far.

Although fans from European countries were outnumbered by their Latin American counterparts, Sorokin said Europe's interest in the World Cup picked up as the tournament went on. "We can only think and speculate why there was not a huge number, why didn't European nations come in huge numbers to support their teams," Sorokin said. "But the truth of the matter is that on the way they really got a taste of the World